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Central Intelligence Agency
Office of the Deputy Director for Intelligence

19 February 1986

The Honorable Dick Cheney
Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
House of Representatives
Washington, D. C. 20515

Dear Congressman Cheney:

Enclosed is my answer to the question
you asked today about the French elections
that are to be held next month.

John L. Helgerson
John L. Helgerson
Associate Deputy Director
for Intelligence

Enclosure:
As stated

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Outlook for the French Election

We believe the conservative electoral alliance--the neo-Gaullist Rally for the Republic and the center-right Union for French Democracy--is likely to win an outright majority in the legislative election on 16 March. The Socialists are making some late gains in the popularity ratings, but public opinion polls, political commentators, recent local election trends, and the "kick-the-rascals-out" mood of the voters all indicate that the conservatives will be swept back into power after a five-year hiatus.

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Socialist President Francois Mitterrand's seven-year term of office, however, does not expire until May 1988, and he has vowed to stay on. Never since General de Gaulle set up the Fifth Republic in 1958 has a president had to "cohabit" with a politically hostile National Assembly, and it could lead to a profound restructuring of the political institutions. The vaguely worded constitution gives the president power to name the prime minister and call a new election; but the prime minister, who names his own government, is accountable to parliament, which can also veto most presidential actions. French presidents from de Gaulle onward have relied on firm backing from parliament to exercise more power than any other elected official in Western Europe.

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The Socialists and conservatives differ little on most policies, and the consensus on defense and foreign policy, in particular, is likely to ensure that there will not be much change in France's external course--especially given the president's traditionally strong role in these areas. If the conservatives gain the upper hand in defense and foreign policy, France is likely to become more openly receptive to SDI and less nettlesome to US policy in many parts of the Third World, including Central America. On the other hand, just as the Socialists have felt obliged to demonstrate their independence by being cool toward the Soviet Union, the conservatives may want to underline their independence of the US by establishing a better dialogue with Moscow. In the meantime, the tussle to establish dominance in foreign policy may slow down the decisionmaking apparatus in Paris.

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Despite strong conservative rhetoric, there is apt to be surprisingly little change in economic policy. The conservatives will maintain the austerity program and try to hold on to the low rate of inflation and improved growth that they will inherit, while searching for a way to bring down unemployment and reduce public debt. Some of the Socialist nationalizations will doubtless be rolled back, but this is likely to be a slow and careful process.

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